

# Motherhood and Slavery in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
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Valentina Stubičan

**Majčinstvo i ropstvo u romanu *Beloved* Toni Morrison**

Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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## **Abstract**

*Beloved*, an acclaimed novel by Toni Morrison, explores and depicts in detail the tragic destiny of slaves, especially slave mothers. This paper examines the horrors of being a mother in the times of slavery, describing it through the main characters of Sethe, Denver, Beloved and Baby Suggs. Starting with a historic portrayal of what it meant to be a mother and a slave at the same time, the paper continues with analyzing the relationships between different characters in order to illustrate the horrors that slavery brought upon motherhood. Not only does *Beloved* give the idea of how important being a mother is, but it also offers an insight into the world where mothers went through enormous pain, suffering, and sexual exploitation to save their children from the same destiny even though it might not have been morally acceptable.

**Key words:** slavery, motherhood, sexual exploitation, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison

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## Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel that excellently describes and explores the damages and consequences of slavery on all aspects of human life, especially motherhood. Mothers have an important role in every child's life and if the mother is absent from everyday life of a child that can be very painful and leave serious consequences. When talking about motherhood in the novel, Morrison "devotes special attention to women-only households and single mother families, which are often the consequence of males' desertion" (Lopez Ramirez 109). Many enslaved women were forced to have sexual relations with several men, thus having children who have different fathers. This led to a lack of love between many mothers and children since they found it severely hard to love children who were conceived without love, especially children conceived by white slave owners. Also, most mother-child relationships were ruined because of rough life conditions. Morrison pays special attention to this problem in her novel – Sethe did not know her mother because she was hanged, Baby Suggs had different opinions when it came to her children, and Sethe as a mother to Denver and Beloved shows what mothers are capable of. All those terrible life conditions left an impact on their lives, even years after they became free. This paper will attempt to discuss the concept of motherhood in the times of slavery by looking at Sethe, Baby Suggs, and their mother-child relationships in order to show the difficulties, cruel conditions, and pain most mothers had to go through at the time of slavery.

# 1. The Historical Background of Slavery and Motherhood

One of the major issues in African American history is slavery. As it is widely known, the victims of that cruel regime were Africans, who were taken to America for exploitation and hard labor. The beginnings of slavery were connected to economy as the main reason for turning Africans into slaves was gaining profit from their hard work. In the seventeenth century, “the first dark-skinned slaves in what was to become British North America arrived in Virginia” (Bourne 1). During those times most of the slaves lived in the South. Slaves depended on their masters and “by the nineteenth century, household heads had far more physical power over their slaves than their employees” (Bourne 5). African Americans were forbidden to write or read and they were punished harshly if doing something wrong. Moreover, since many slaves were women, slave owners did not hold back in using them to satisfy their sexual needs.

Inferior and seen as animals, slave mothers had the most horrible destiny one could imagine. Being a slave was by itself terrible and gruesome, but having a child made everything far more dreadful. African American slave mothers and their children were not seen as human beings. Families were separated and destroyed. Mothers and fathers were often separated not just from each other, but also from their children. This cruelty of belonging to someone else made it intensely hard to function as a family. Even if some mothers had same slave owners as their children, their lives were not nearly as normal. Each day, mothers were filled with pain, grief, frustration, sadness, and fear. Not allowed to take care or nurture their children, mothers had no opportunity to raise them properly.

Being pregnant while being someone’s slave was a painful experience many slave mothers faced. It is known that carrying a child is hard by itself, but doing it while performing painstaking physical jobs and being abused almost every day was far more frightful and heartbreaking. These conditions led to many children being born with disabilities since they were not given enough prenatal care. This made mother’s everyday lives ten times harder and not to mention that slave owners had little empathy for them, thus forcing them to go back to work just a few days after they gave birth. Because of that, “[t]heir mothers – already beleaguered by a barrage of labor demands, with their parental role forcibly subordinated to the economic interest of slaveholders – confronted even greater obstacles in meeting their disabled children’s needs and protecting them from an institution that objectified and devalued them” (Barclay 120).

Hard physical work did not only leave consequences on babies, but on mothers themselves. Cowling et al. explain that mothers experienced many damages due to slavery and because of that failed to carry their fetuses to term (224). Moreover, slave owners never cared for their pain and struggle: “Though they were aware to some extent that very hard work was not beneficial, they placed the blame for the loss of slave babies on their mothers, who were often accused of smothering their infants” (Jennings 54). Furthermore, fear was always present among enslaved mothers. Every mother wants the best for her child, but not knowing whether your child would be taken away from you or whether it would survive the terrible conditions of slavery was horrifying. Consequently, some mothers deliberately avoided having children. Many others who had children tried to protect them from the institution of slavery. Morrison exemplifies this in her novel *Beloved* mainly through Sethe, a mother who is so scarred by the slavery that she is ready to do inexplicable things to her most loving ones. Even though many readers were not the victims of slavery themselves and cannot relate to everything the characters in the novel had been through, Morrison does an amazing job painting the picture of how it was and manages to evoke the cruelty of it. The slavery regime and brutal racism that revolved around African American people was immensely horrifying and the fact that the discrimination of African Americans still exists in this century makes everything even more sorrowful.

## 2. The Depiction of Sexual Abuse in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Morrison, “[u]nconstrained by nineteenth-century mores, . . . breaks open the taboo on speaking openly about sexuality and sexual abuse” (Montgomery 55). Many characters in the novel experience traumas because of their past, which was filled with sexual assaults. Sethe, the main character, is lucky to have the same father for all her four children. Yet, during her enslaved time at the Sweet Home, she faced a brutal assault, which affected her as a mother. The physical abuse she went through symbolizes the hardships that slave mothers had to go through because the men, as she states, “took my milk” (Morrison 17). She was deprived of one thing that connected her to her children – her milk:

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk!”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison 20)

Sethe did not care about the fact that they beat her, she only cared about her milk, which was meant for her children. On the one hand, this shows her love towards her children and the fact that they were of the utmost importance for her. On the other, she represents all enslaved mothers who struggled and were in an enormous pain because they could not raise or nurse their children properly. Sethe would do anything to protect her children and her murder of *Beloved* proves that. In addition, she would do anything for her children, even selling her own body (this is how she manages to engrave *Beloved*’s tombstone).

Baby Suggs was raped several times and had different men father her children. This affects her life greatly as she struggles to connect emotionally with her children. Another character who went through this despicable act is Ella, who does not want to nurse her child because it was conceived through rape and, consequently, the child dies. These are only some of the examples of how slavery sexualized and sexually abused women. White men had an absolute power over enslaved people and they could do whatever they wished to them, without facing consequences, which left many women with unforgettable traumas.

### **3. Sethe and Her Mother**

One of the central characters of *Beloved* is Sethe. Based on a real life Margaret Garner, Sethe symbolizes black slave women who were the victims of white patriarchy (Watson, “The Power of the ‘Milk’” 160). Furthermore, Sethe portrays the tragedy of being both a mother and a daughter in the slave South. With her mother, she has no opportunity to establish a real mother-daughter relationship and thus struggles to establish one with her own children.

#### **3.1. Separation**

One of the most horrifying consequences of slavery is certainly the separation of children from their mothers since those mothers did not have a chance to bond, raise, nurse, or create emotional attachments to their children. Likewise, Sethe is separated from her mother and does not get the chance to get to know her and spend her life with someone who would take care of her, love her, or keep her safe. The only memory Sethe has of her mother is that of her mother carrying her behind the smoke house and showing her the mark under her breast. Her mother’s mark makes Sethe want it too so that her mother could recognize her as her daughter. This clearly shows how much Sethe wants mother in her life. Yet, instead of being with her, Sethe’s mother is hanged. That leaves Sethe empty and deprived because, on the one hand, she loses the most important person in her life and, on the other, she feels as if her mother left her behind as only those slaves who tried to escape were hanged. Her mother chose a path she thought would lead her to a better place. Likewise, Sethe thinks she would free her children by killing them.

#### **3.2. Love and Protection**

Slavery dehumanized Sethe’s mother so much that she discarded all her children except Sethe: “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. . . . Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man” (Morrison 62). This describes the level of pain women felt when raped: Sethe’s mother got rid of her children because they reminded her of her rapist(s). Moreover, the usage of word “threw” shows and

emphasizes the lack of love Sethe's mother had for her other children. There was no connection between them. She only kept Sethe because she loved her father and her death might have been a way in which she wanted to protect her daughter. Like any other slave mother, she had almost no opportunity to raise or nurse Sethe on her own, which is of a huge importance for every mother, today or in the past, because "[i]f milk can be viewed symbolically as a mother's present and enduring love, then lack of milk can suggest maternal abandonment" (Mock 119). Deprived of nursing and milking, Sethe's mother symbolically addresses the struggle and pain of all enslaved mothers. When she was just a child, Sethe could not understand what was going on and what was her mother doing. When she grows up and has children on her own, she starts to understand her mother's actions and the depth of love her mother had for her.

## 4. Sethe as a Mother

Later in the novel, when Sethe grows up and is a mother herself, she is so traumatized by her experience of slavery that she would rather kill all of her children than subject them to the horrors of slavery: “I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher” (Morrison 163). Her acts are thus rather monstrous than motherly, yet, on the other hand, they can be seen as **the** acts of love since the only thing she wants for her children is to be safe and not to go through everything she had to endure: “Sethe was not a bad mother; she was a slave mother who, when faced with an attack upon her motherhood, decided to empower herself by taking the life she gave. She willingly chooses to deconstruct the traditional role of mother by committing the crime of ‘love murder’” (Watson, “The Power of the ‘Milk’” 161). The tragic event of her mother’s hanging shaped Sethe and her thoughts about slavery and being a mother: as she was denied mother’s nursing, care, and love, she puts a lot of emphasis on nursing her own children. Moreover, since Sethe knows how it is not to have what you need the most in your life, a mother who loves you and a mother to love, she wants to provide her children with everything she can:

Deprived of a mother’s milk and bonds, knowing the ravenous void in her belly and in her heart, Sethe wants better for her children. She vows her children will never know that hunger. She claims ownership of her children, despite their enslavement and her own. They will have milk of their own. They will never have to share, they will have their own time to suckle and she will be their provider. (Mock 119)

All she has for her children is her milk, so when it gets stolen she is more affected by the fact that they dared to steal it than by getting whipped. Stealing her milk is a crime not only done to Sethe but also to her children.

### 4.1. Sethe and Denver

Sethe’s relationship with her daughter Denver is certainly unique. She is very protective of Denver, but even though one of the main things a mom ought to do is to protect her child, Sethe spends her whole life being too protective of Denver, keeping her away from the cruelty of the world, thus limiting her to the house. “What must be emphasized here is that Sethe is

passionately committed to and fiercely protective of, her children, and that her nurturance is a radical act of defiance against the prohibition against slave motherhood (O'Reilly 131). She does not want Denver to leave her as her two sons did. Because of that, while growing up, Denver never had the opportunity to explore the outside world. By being stuck in their house, she struggles to become an independent woman, which is something that Sethe does not want to happen. Eventually, that starts to bother Denver: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (Morrison 14). Near the end of the novel, Denver is forced to leave her house and go into the outside world. She finds a job in order to provide for her mother, who, "without Denver and community, . . . would die from exhaustion and hunger, still locked in psychological conflict with her ghost-daughter" (Montgomery 131).

Furthermore, Sethe hides her past, which complicates their relationship even more. All her actions make Denver even more isolated and alienated. When she finds out about her mother's despicable act, "certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her" (Morrison 102). She slowly begins to realize why Sethe prevented her from having a normal life and why she is so into protecting her children from her destiny. Despite their difficult relationship, Denver admires and loves her mother. Her mother is all she has, which is the reason she is very protective of her. When she starts fearing Beloved and what she may do to Sethe, she does everything to keep her mother safe. All this shows that even the most complicated mother-daughter relationships do not lack love and compassion.

Even though most characters in the novel deal with the past and its problems, Morrison positions Denver as a ray of hope because she is a survivor. Readers can follow her personal growth regardless of the difficult childhood and hard life circumstances. Life is hard for Denver, irrespective of not being a slave herself. She does not face physical pain slave mothers suffered, yet she faces the psychological and emotional one because she spends her whole life isolated in her house, which nevertheless makes her stronger and she rises above all her fears and troubles. Also, through seeking help and getting in touch with the community, Denver begins to heal: "Morrison positions Denver on the path toward empowerment because Denver's birth occurs (with a white woman's help) during Sethe's flight to freedom and her bloody union with her sister occurs when her mother challenges the oppressive slavocracy" (Beaulieu 43).



## 4.2. Sethe and Beloved

The relationship between Sethe and Beloved is intriguing as it is debatable whether Beloved is an ordinary girl who survived some terrible things or just a ghost. Her appearance, bad linguistic expression, and neediness are just some of the things that speak in favor of the former. Immediately when she appears, Sethe's life turns upside down since Beloved acts as her dead daughter, knowing many things from Sethe's past. Beloved also shows a huge passion towards Sethe and thus they become intertwined in a destructive yet helpful relationship. Being constantly drawn into the past when with Beloved, Sethe tries, again and again, to explain her choices to Beloved and why she did what she did. Even though, in general, their relationship is seen as a destructive one, it may have some good sides as Sethe starts to open up about her past and begins speaking about something she never spoke before. This helps her heal the wounds left by her horrendous experience at Sweet Home:

Sethe, in *Beloved*, learns to live with the past and to accept herself through psychic journey of remembering. And it is the daughter who enables the mother to remember, accept, and forgive. Thus, the mother-daughter relationship both represents and achieves an identification with, and an acceptance of, the past. Thus, in and through her relationship with Beloved, the embodiment of the African American motherline, Sethe finds her own lost motherline. (O'Reilly 87)

The relationship between Beloved and Sethe portrays the trauma of slavery: Beloved stands for the historical trauma whereas Sethe addresses the psychological one (O'Reilly 85). Beloved leads Sethe back into her past, making her talk about everything she has been through and thus enables the readers to understand the cruelty mothers had to go through in the times of slavery. At the same time, Sethe addresses the psychological trauma of slavery because of all the emotional and psychological hardships she went through. Their relationship is also destructive because "Beloved, as a character whose naming history is clouded, becomes a trickster able to change forms and cause trouble and misfortune among the living" (Beaulieu 2). She represents the destructive past that characters must face in order to prevail over it, move on, and focus on the future. In addition, Beloved represents all the children who suffered family separation and loss of mothers because of slavery

In the novel, Morrison also introduces a parent-child role reversal. In other words, Beloved becomes the mother while Sethe acts like a child. Furthermore, Beloved is solely

concentrated on Sethe and wants her for herself: “She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have” (Morrison 76). Eventually, their relationship becomes too much for Sethe as the sole memory of her past and her gruesome act gradually weakens Sethe, making Beloved, on the other hand, stronger. Moreover, Sethe starts getting thinner and thinner while Beloved gains so much weight that she looks as if she were pregnant. She tries to take everything she can from Sethe as if in an attempt to compensate for the years she has been absent from Sethe’s and Denver’s life. On the other hand, the way that Beloved evokes Sethe’s past may be good for her as she finally opens up and does not keep everything bottled up. For years, Sethe tried to forget her past, but now she relives it again.

Unlike Denver, who represents hope in difficult times such as slavery, Beloved represents its cruel reality, the past coming back to haunt the present. Many slaves, including Sethe, struggled to establish a normal life years after slavery was abolished. Despite being free, their past of being prisoners and having someone else control them and their family interferes with their present. Thus, through the characters of Denver and Beloved, Morrison portrays two different ways enslaved mothers lived after they became free. Since slavery was inexplicably gruesome, the number of those who struggled to live normally prevailed.

### **4.3. Sethe and Her Sons**

Even though they remain absent throughout most of the novel, Howard and Buglar’s relationship with Sethe can nevertheless be analyzed. As soon as the novel begins, readers are introduced to the fact that her two sons left 124:

Howard and Buglar had run away by the time they were thirteen years old – as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy wanted to see more; kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (Morrison 3)

If we are to believe the narrator, Buglar and Howard fled 124 because of the ghost that came into their house. This remains the sole reason for their departure until chapter 16 where another possible reason for their decision is given: the narrator explains that both Buglar and Howard were next to be killed: “Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger

woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (Morrison 149). Considering the fact that they were older, Howard and Buglar could understand what was going on, unlike Denver, who was just a baby. They were old enough to know that what Sethe did was wrong and seeing their mother do that generated fear of her trying to do it again, which made them go somewhere where they would feel safer. This proves that Sethe did not have a loving bond with her two sons. Instead of seeing her as a loving and protective mother, they thought of her as a threat. Furthermore, the **relationship** between Sethe, Howard and Buglar shows that slavery was able to destroy families irrevocably. Mothers were not the only ones who suffered from the cruelty based on their skin color. Children, despite not having been victims themselves, felt the pain and consequences of slavery. Thus, Howard and Buglar made their decision because of their mother, a slave victim who tried to protect her children from the same destiny.

## 5. Baby Suggs as a Mother

Baby Suggs has a different view on motherhood from Sethe. Her children are not with her, but unlike Sethe who cannot let her dead child go, she is aware of and accepts the fact that she will probably never see her children again. Still, she is a positive character in the novel considering her significance for the community. Also, Baby Suggs represents a mother figure for Sethe and gives her the nurture and love that she could not receive from her own mother. Furthermore, Baby Suggs, unlike Sethe's mother, loves all her children no matter who their father is. Before she dies, it seems as if Baby Suggs passes on her wisdom to Denver. Being discriminated and dehumanized, she teaches Denver to love herself and never let anyone else convince her differently: "Denver is truly a ray of hope, a progressive step beyond the harsh indignities that her mother, her grandmother, and other black mothers had to endure. By work's end, it becomes clear that Denver will not be just another victim; her body will not be violated by the phallus of white or black society" (Watson, "Derogatory Images of Sex"106).

### 5.1. Baby Suggs and Halle

Unlike Sethe, Baby Suggs emotionally disconnects from her children because she knows that they will be taken away from her. She has eight children, but she lost all of them one way or the other:

It wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot, examined the fat fingertips with her own – fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their hands when they walked. (Morrison 139)

This is the worst thing that can happen to a mother, so blocking herself emotionally from them is her way of keeping herself preserved. The only child of hers whom she saw become an adult is Halle, Sethe's husband. Just like other black women, she was exploited by men, both black and white. Most children were taken away from their slave mothers after they were born, but Baby Suggs was lucky to manage to keep at least one of her children with her, that being Halle:

“And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn’t mean a thing” (Morrison 23). Most of the mothers who gave birth as slaves found it hard to love their child since it was conceived by a white man. Yet, Halle is different, he is conceived by a black man. That is why Baby Suggs is able to love him and sees hope in him. Unfortunately, the cruelty of slavery did not allow her to keep her son next to her since he buys his freedom.

## 5.2. The Community

Baby Suggs is not only a mother to her biological children, she is a mother to her community as well. She does not have love just for individuals, but she also shows affection for the community through sermons, advices, and instructions how to love themselves, just like a mother would. After everything she has been through, she is left with nothing but hate towards the slave owners so she shares her thoughts: “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty” (Morrison 88) and preaches about freedom and love to the whole community: “Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!” (Morrison 88). By giving this sermon, Baby Suggs acts as a mother of the community and shows the reality of slavery, more precisely, what being a mother in the times of slavery means. She explains that people were treated just as numbers and objects, not humans. Even though slavery leaves her with major consequences, she remains a bright person who brings love to 124 and the community. Thus, she “reclaims her family relationships and reclaims her relationships to her God, and to her place in community” (Jesser 329). Moreover, “Baby Suggs is devastated when her own community turns against her, refusing to warn her of the approach of the slave hunters” (Montgomery 129). When Sethe kills Beloved, she changes. She can no longer see colors and spends most of her time lying in bed because she cannot stand the fact that she lost another child, even though it is not biologically hers.

## Conclusion

While slavery may have ruined the relationships between mothers and children and made mothers do unexplainable things, it did not manage to destroy the love between them. Every mother cares and shows her love for her children in a different way, whether through crossing normal boundaries to protect them or distancing themselves and their emotions, which Toni Morrison perfectly depicts and illustrates through her characters in *Beloved*. Slavery brought many misfortunes upon mother characters in the novel: for instance, Sethe decides about her children's fate, Baby Suggs is separated from all her children, and Sethe's mother gets rid of all her children except Sethe because of the cruel system. They all have their ways of dealing with the pain as well: for example, Baby Suggs finds a relief through emotional disconnection, Sethe through immorality, her sons by running away from her, and so on. Despite all that, one thing that could not be destroyed by slavery was the strong and powerful maternal love, which Morrison portrays in her *Beloved*.

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